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GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY IN HERODOTUS AND IN EZRA-NEHEMIAH

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The sequence of the Persian kings¹ is out of order in the Aramaic section of Ezra 4:7–6:18.² The Hebrew introduction to the section, Ezra 4:4–5, states that there was conflict over the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple from the time of Cyrus in the late sixth century B.C.E. to the reign of Darius in the late fifth century B.C.E. Ezra 4:24 repeats the message of 4:4–5 by noting the completion of the temple under Darius. Yet Ezra 4:7–23 contains an exchange of

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¹ The chronology and dates of the Persian kings are as follows: Cyrus (539–530 B.C.E.); Cambyses (530–522 B.C.E.); Darius I (522–486 B.C.E.); Xerxes (486–465 B.C.E.); Artaxerxes I (465–423 B.C.E.); Darius II (423–404 B.C.E.); Artaxerxes II (404–359 B.C.E.); Artaxerxes III (359–338 B.C.E.); and Darius III (336–331 B.C.E.). See A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire (Achaemenid Period)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); and Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*, vol. 1, *The Persian and Greek Periods* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 119–46.

² The Aramaic section of Ezra contains four letters: (1) a letter from Rehum to Artaxerxes (4:8–16); (2) the reply of Artaxerxes (4:17–22); (3) a letter from Tattenai to Darius (5:6–17); and (4) the reply of Darius (6:3–12), which includes a copy of the decree of Cyrus (6:3–5). There is one additional Aramaic document, Ezra 7:12–26, the edict by Artaxerxes authorizing Ezra to establish the Law of Moses in the province *Abar Naharah*. Ezra 4:7–6:18 is characterized as a “chronicle,” because the narrative connecting the letters is also in Aramaic, suggesting to some that the author employed a source document. See W. Rudolph, *Ezra und Nehemia* (HAT 20; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1949), xxii; A. H. J. Gunneweg, “Die aramäische und die hebräische Erzählung über die nachexilische Restauration—ein Vergleich,” ZAW 94 (1982): 299–302; and D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 8. But compare H. G. M. Williamson, who suggests that only the individual letters are source documents, and that the Aramaic narrative connecting them is the creation of the author of Ezra 1–6 (*Ezra, Nehemiah* [WBC 16; Waco: Word, 1985], xxiii–xxiv).

letters between Rehum and the Persian king Artaxerxes I to account for the delay in the construction of the temple, even though Artaxerxes I ruled after Darius in the fourth century B.C.E.³

H. G. M. Williamson identified the repetition of Ezra 4:4–5 and 24 as resumptive, indicating that Ezra 4:7–23 is intended to be a digression.⁴ Resumptive repetitions emphasize the spatial organization of literature over chronology and temporal sequence. The setting of a story often emerges as the point of focus in spatially organized literature.⁵ Yet past interpretations of Ezra 4:7–23 have ignored a spatial interpretation of the correspondence between Rehum and Artaxerxes, even though the disruption of historical sequence encourages such a reading.

The central spatial category in Ezra 4:7–23 is the setting, the territory of *Abar Naharah* (עבר נהר), an Aramaic term translated “Beyond the River.”⁶ The correspondence of Rehum and Artaxerxes introduces this region into the story, and it is repeated no fewer than five times (Ezra 4:10, 11, 16, 17, 20). *Abar Naharah* represents a blending of geographical realism and literary freedom. It signifies the broadest territory of Persian rule in Ezra-Nehemiah (v. 16), corresponding to a variety of ancient sources that identify *Abar Naharah* as a geopolitical region in the Persian empire. Yet the territory also

³ Artaxerxes is not clearly identified in Ezra-Nehemiah. Recent historical studies emphasize the reign of Artaxerxes I in the mid-fifth century B.C.E. as the setting for the events in Ezra-Nehemiah (see K. Hoglund, *Achaemenid Imperial Administration in Syria-Palestine and the Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah* [SBLDS 125; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992]); and Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995]). The identification results in the following four Persian monarchs in Ezra-Nehemiah: Cyrus (in reference to his decree concerning the rebuilding of the temple, Ezra 1:2, 7, 8; 3:7; 4:3, 5; 5:13, 14, 17; 6:3, 14), Darius (as the monarch who fulfills the decree of Cyrus, Ezra 4:5, 24; 5:5, 6, 7; 6:1, 12, 13, 14, 15), Xerxes (= Ahasuerus in Ezra 4:6), and Artaxerxes I (as the ruler who commissions both Ezra and Nehemiah, Ezra 4:7, 8, 11, 23; 6:14; 7:1, 7, 11, 12, 21; 8:1; Neh 2:1; 5:14; 13:6). But scholars debate the references to Artaxerxes I. Some argue that the mission of Ezra takes place under Artaxerxes II (see G. Widengren, “The Persian Period,” in *Israelite and Judaeon History* [ed. J. H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977], 503–9). R. J. Saley places both the mission of Ezra and that of Nehemiah during the reign of Artaxerxes II (“The Date of Nehemiah Reconsidered,” in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor* [ed. G. A. Tuttle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 151–65). Either date for the mission of Ezra creates the problem of chronology with regard to the reference to Artaxerxes in Ezra 4:7–23.

⁴ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 57. For the original discussion of resumptive repetition, see C. Kuhl, “Die ‘Wiederaufnahme’—eine literarisches Princip,” ZAW 64 (1952): 1–11.

⁵ For general discussion, see *Spatial Form in Narrative* (ed. J. R. Smitten and A. Daghistany; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). For the application of spatial-form methodology to interpret setting in biblical historiography, see T. B. Dozeman, *God on the Mountain* (SBLMS 37; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

⁶ See also the Aramaic עבר נהר.

exceeds its literal representation. The reply of Artaxerxes to Rehum, that past kings of Jerusalem ruled *Abar Naharah* (4:20), is not history.⁷ Thus, despite the emphasis by Artaxerxes on archives, written records, and research, the content of his letter indicates that the territory plays a role in the ideological world of Ezra-Nehemiah.

I wish to explore the creative interaction of geographical realism and ideology surrounding *Abar Naharah* in the historiography of Ezra-Nehemiah.⁸ A limited number of studies describe the geopolitical background of *Abar Naharah*,⁹ but there is yet no spatial reading of *Abar Naharah* that intertwines both historical geography and ideological design in Ezra-Nehemiah. This absence of research creates a problem of methodology, requiring that I begin my study with a broad lens. I will examine the role of geography in the historiography of Herodotus, who, like the author of Ezra-Nehemiah, fashioned his history under the influence of Persian rule. Past research on Herodotus's use of geography will assist in fashioning a methodology for interpreting *Abar*

⁷ N. Na'aman concludes that descriptions of ancient Israelite kings ruling over the province *Abar Naharah* (= Akkadian *ebir nari*) "has no basis in the actual history of the country" (*Borders and Districts in Biblical Historiography* [Jerusalem Biblical Studies 4; Jerusalem: Simor, 1986], 244–45). A number of solutions have been offered to account for this problem. R. J. Coggins offers two reasons. The claim may represent "a universal tendency to exaggerate the power of one's enemies," or "it may be the Chronicler's way of referring obliquely to David's greatness" (*The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* [CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976], 32). H. H. Grosheide reads the exaggeration as manipulation of Artaxerxes by the regional opponents of the Judean community (*Ezra-Nehemia I, Ezra* [Kampen: Kok, 1963], 45). K. Galling rereads the text so that it refers not to Judean kings but to past Assyrian and Babylonian kings who ruled over *Abar Naharah* and the city of Jerusalem (*Die Bücher der Chronik, Esra, Nehemia* [ATD 12; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954], 198). He is followed by Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 64; and F. C. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 75–76. But a reference to Assyrian kings has nothing to do with the threat posed by Rehum if Jerusalem is rebuilt. No interpretation has yet explored the larger literary role of *Abar Naharah* in Ezra-Nehemiah to account for the reference.

⁸ I am interpreting Ezra-Nehemiah as historiographical literature rather than as fiction (see C. C. Torrey, *The Composition and Historical Value of Ezra-Nehemiah* [BZAW 2; Gießen: J. Ricker Buchhandlung, 1896]) or as memoir (see Sigmund Mowinckel, "Die vorderasiatischen Königs- und Fürsteninschriften," in *Eucharisterion: H. Gunkel zum 60. Geburtstag* [FRLANT 36; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1923], 278–322). Arnaldo Momigliano examined the memoir within a broad study of Greek and Jewish biographical literature from the Persian period (*The Development of Greek Biography* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993], 35–36). He concluded that the memoir, with its focus on the individual, does not provide an adequate description of the present form of Ezra-Nehemiah, where "the close connection between history and geography emphasized concern with the community rather than with the individual." See also the discussion by Shemaryahu Talmon, "Ezra-Nehemia: Historiographie oder Theologie?" in *Ernten, was man sät: Festschrift für Klaus Koch zum seinem 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Dwight R. Daniels et al.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991), 329–56, esp. 355–56.

⁹ Most notably, see A. F. Rainey, "The Satrapy 'Beyond the River,'" *AJBA* 1 (1969): 51–78.

Naharah in Ezra-Nehemiah. I will conclude the article by returning to the influence of Persian rule on the history writing of Herodotus and the author of Ezra-Nehemiah.

I. Geography and History in Herodotus

The interaction of geographical realism and ideological social and political commentary in Ezra-Nehemiah is characteristic of ancient historiography. The role of geography is so strong in Herodotus, for example, that Kurt von Fritz proposed a progression in his work from a geographer and ethnographer to a historian.¹⁰ He concludes that the two approaches cannot be separated, since both contribute to a new critical orientation toward tradition. Von Fritz argues that the vast domain of the Persian empire allowed for discovery through travel. As a result, new geographical horizons emerged, calling into question traditional cosmological geography, such as the map of Anaximander. The breakdown of traditional geography also challenged Greek legends based on it, creating discontinuity with the past. Ancient historiography, according to von Fritz, is the result of the new world order of the Persian empire.¹¹ It influenced Herodotus's view of both space and time, making geography and historiography inseparable.

Most scholars agree with von Fritz, emphasizing that the progression in Herodotus from geographer to historian is fueled by a change in his use of geography. Herodotus introduces a more critical approach to geography than his predecessors.¹² He rejects past circular world maps in which Ocean is depicted as flowing around the earth, promising the reader, instead, geographical realism.¹³ But the geographical realism of Herodotus must not be mistaken

¹⁰ Kurt von Fritz, *Die Griechische Geschichtsschreibung*, Band 1, *Von den Anfängen bis Thukydides* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), 24; idem, "Herodotus and the Growth of Greek Historiography," *TAPA* 67 (1936): 315–40.

¹¹ Von Fritz, *Die Griechische Geschichtsschreibung*, 24–25.

¹² See O. A. W. Dilke, *Greek and Roman Maps* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 57–58. J. Van Seters describes the critical perspective in Herodotus as "the new scientific age" in contrast to a "heroic perspective" (*In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983], 23). He writes: "The contrast . . . can . . . be seen in the subject of world geography. Through travels and accounts . . . the strange places and customs of others are made part of the known world instead of the fantasy lands of the Odyssey."

¹³ Herodotus writes, "I am amused to see those many who have drawn maps of the world and not one of them making a reasonable appearance of it. They draw Ocean flowing around an earth that is as circular as though traced by compasses, and they make Asia the same size as Europe. In some few words I will myself make plain the greatness of each of these divisions and what shape each should have been" (*Hist.* 4.36; see also 2.23; 4.8).

as a branch of the physical sciences. Many of his descriptions of distant places and people cannot withstand the scrutiny of historical geography, nor can they be interpreted literally. Examples include his discussion of the eastern Indians (*Hist.* 3.98–106), the northern Hyperboreans (4.13, 32–36), and the southern Ethiopians (3.17–26). These nations dwell at the edges of the world. Their stories reach Herodotus as travelers' tales or poetic fancy, which can be neither confirmed nor denied.¹⁴ This use of geography represents "a literary genre more than a branch of the physical sciences," best characterized as "humanist geography," according to James Romm.¹⁵

More pertinent for an interpretation of *Abar Naharah* in Ezra-Nehemiah is the way in which Herodotus employs realistic geography to advance the geopolitical theme in his *Histories*, the enmity between the East and the West, represented by the "continents" of Asia and Europe.¹⁶ The development of the geopolitical theme required an anthropocentric interpretation of geography, according to Henry R. Immerwahr, in which nations form customs (*nomoi*) and create worldviews, in part, from their location and physical environment.¹⁷ Thus climate and topography affect national character, creating natural limits and geographical boundaries between peoples.¹⁸ Egyptian customs, according to Herodotus, are the opposite of those of other nations, because the Egyptian climate is the reverse of other territories (*Hist.* 2.35.2).¹⁹

Herodotus's interpretation of the Persians is the most extensive use of geography and ethnography in his *Histories*.²⁰ The Persians belong naturally to

¹⁴ In writing about the geography of Ocean, Herodotus concludes that the person who first proposed the theory "has carried his story, which is indeed only a tale, back to where it vanishes and so cannot be disproved" (*Hist.* 2.23).

¹⁵ James Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3–8.

¹⁶ Romm describes the geopolitical dimension of the *Histories* as a literary *mappamundi* (*Herodotus* [Hermes Books; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998], xiv–xv). Herodotus writes his history within the context of three "continents," Europe, Asia, and Libya, although his focus is on Europe and Asia (*Hist.* 4.37–45).

¹⁷ Henry R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Philological Monographs; Cleveland: Press of Western Reserve University, 1966), 317.

¹⁸ See the discussion of the lingering influence of Herodotus's "environmental determinism" on contemporary spatial ideology in Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 93–123. Although "environmental determinism" is central to the *Histories* (3.38.1–4), it only partially influences national customs (see the contrast between the Euxine Pontus and the Scythians [*Hist.* 4.46]). See Donald Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (Phoenix Supplementary Volumes; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 158–59.

¹⁹ See von Fritz, *Griechische Geschichtsschreibung*, 128–57, esp. 153–54.

²⁰ For general discussion see Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus*, 148–88; and Romm, *Herodotus*, 173–90.

Asia, and their customs reflect this setting.²¹ Their strength arises from their environment. They wear leather and eat whatever is available, because they live in a land of rocks (*Hist.* 1.71).

"Unity" is the highest character trait of the Persians, creating social cohesion and honor in their society.²² It also fuels their need for a monarch. The rule of "one best man," argued by Darius, reflects in part his Asian environment.²³ Thus, despotism, according to Herodotus, thrives in the East, because it is in the national character (*nomos*) of the Persians. But an excess of unity is also the central weakness of the Persian kings. The Persian need for unity drives their aggressive desire for conquest. They force their custom of unity beyond their territory, the environment in which it was intended to function. And, as a result, the Persians impose their custom of unity on other people, and thus they violate a natural law of limitation and geography.²⁴ In this action Persian monarchs represent the breakdown of law for Herodotus.

The violation of geography and the Persian need for absolute control prompt other forms of lawlessness. Cambyses disrespects Egyptian customs through his ethnocentrism (*Hist.* 3.16). He and Xerxes also repeatedly violate their own laws when it suits their purposes.²⁵ Autocratic justice is arbitrary, according to Herodotus, "the king of Persia might do whatever he wishes" (*Hist.* 3.31).²⁶ Even Cyrus, the wise founder of the empire, meets his ruin through bloodthirsty deceit, violating the customs of the Massagetae (*Hist.* 1.212). In violating the natural boundaries of their rule, Persian despots are not constrained by law, but manipulate customs and institutions for their own ends.

²¹ "The Persians claim, as their own, Asia and all the barbarian people who live in it, but Europe and the Greek people they regard as entirely separate" (*Hist.* 1.4).

²² See *Hist.* 1.131–40, which describes the customs of the Persians; see also Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus*, 185–88, on the central role of unity in Persian culture.

²³ *Histories* 3.80–82 contains a debate between Otanes, Megabyzus, and Darius about the proper form of government. Otanes advocates democracy; Megabyzus, oligarchy; and Darius, monarchy. In the end, history and custom win the argument for Darius, for it was a monarch that freed the Persians. Monarchy, argues Darius, is an ancestral law, a custom for the Persians that must not be broken. Herodotus provides his view of Eastern despotism by recounting how Darius actually acquired his rule (*Hist.* 3.85–87).

²⁴ *Histories* 7.8 contains a speech by Xerxes indicating the Persian drive to unify through conquest and hence his need to cross the Hellespont, "Men of Persia, it is not new law that I initiate among you; it has come to me from tradition. For as I learn from older men, we have never been at peace since we took over the supremacy from the Medes, when Cyrus deposed Astyages. It is the god that leads us on." See Lateiner, *Historical Method of Herodotus*, 152–55; and especially Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus*, 144–88.

²⁵ *Histories* 1.137 states that Persian kings never punish for a single misdeed, but calculate past services against disloyal acts. But compare Cambyses' treatment of Sisamnes (*Hist.* 5.25) and Xerxes' action against Puthius (*Hist.* 7.38–39) and the Phoenicians at Salamis (*Hist.* 8.90).

²⁶ Xerxes wishes to make the territory of Persia equal to the rule of Zeus (*Hist.* 7.8).

This aggression and ethnocentrism is a hubris stated geographically by Herodotus: "There is a progression in honor in relation to the distance. They hold least in honor those whose habitation is furthest from their own" (*Hist.* 1.134).

The interpretation of geography and ideology in ancient historiography requires clear methodological focus. Claude Nicolet introduced an important distinction between "historical geography" and "the history of geography" in the study of ancient history.²⁷ "Historical geography" investigates geographical realities, including vegetation, cultivation, roads, land possession, population, settlements, and boundaries. The "history of geography" explores the awareness of territory and its representation in the literature, uncovering "the mentality and ideology" of the writers.²⁸

The distinction of Nicolet is an important starting point for interpreting the use of geography in ancient historiography. But the two categories create the danger of interpreting the different uses of geography as a simple opposition between fact and fiction. To focus only on the factual to explain a text is to fall prey to the "realistic illusion," according to Henri Lefebvre.²⁹ Such a narrow methodology assumes that the text is opaque, reflecting only the objectivity of historical geography. Edward W. Soja writes that a study limited to historical geography cannot be "substituted for [an] explanation of the social production of space."³⁰ Conversely, the singular quest for the "mentality" of the author, introduces the "illusion of transparency," as though the geographical representation was no more than a cipher for ideas.³¹ The writing of Herodotus suggests that the use of geography in ancient historiography represents a complex interaction of physical geography and social construction. The resulting worldview provides the basis for Herodotus to judge present cultures and to provide glimpses of new utopian possibilities.

Lefebvre and Soja offer a three-part model for interpreting spatial representation in contemporary society, not ancient historiography. Yet their categories provide methodological focus for interrelating the different functions of geography in ancient historiography.³² The first category is perceived space: it

²⁷ Claude Nicolet, *Space, Geography, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (Jerome Lectures 19; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 3–5, 9.

²⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (trans. D. N. Nicholson-Smith; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 27–30.

³⁰ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 123; *idem*, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 64, 157.

³¹ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 27–29; Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 124–26; *idem*, *Thirdspace*, 63–64, 157.

³² The translation of a social model aimed at contemporary life to ancient literature is heuristic, and I present it with caution. Lefebvre states the problem of translating theoretical social

is the concrete, physical geography of our world.³³ Perceived space in the work of Herodotus would represent his aim to advance a description of world geography grounded in the physical terrain and open to testing and modification, as opposed to the legend or myth of Ocean.

The second category, conceived space, includes the social order that is interwoven and imposed on physical geography.³⁴ Conceived space is a self-conscious construction of physical space. It is created or imagined by a society, thus representing public and overt social forms of power and ideology. Conceived space in Herodotus would represent his social configuration of the "continents," and it would also include his work on ethnography, where he seeks to relate physical geography to national and social structures.

The third category, lived space, is the immediate world of experience.³⁵ Lived space embraces physical geography (perceived space) and public social structures (conceived space) within the immediacy of one's inhabited world of emotions, events, and public choices. Both Lefebvre and Soja underscore overlap between conceived and lived space, and this is especially true in ancient historiography, since both categories arise from an author's experience. A possible distinction is that lived space is a less self-conscious construction, representing more the immediate and overwhelming influence of a worldview. Herodotus's use of environmental determinism to contrast Persian and Greek customs (*nomoi*) may represent the power of lived space in his history writing. Lived space is both a presupposition and a driving force in Herodotus's own worldview, while it also shapes the literary design of his entire work.

Lefebvre and Soja stress that the three representations of space must be interrelated, not separated. The application of their model to interpret geography in ancient historiography would reinforce the same point. The power of geographical representation in ancient historiography arises from the interweaving of physical and historical geography with social and ideological representations, and not from their separation into the categories of myth and history, or the physical and the mental. This is certainly evident in Herodotus's critical evaluation of Asia and the Persian monarchs. It is also true of the representation of geography in Ezra-Nehemiah.

models to literature: "The problem is that any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about" (*Production of Space*, 15).

³³ Lefebvre describes this category as "spatial practice" (*Production of Space*, 33, et passim). See Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 74–79.

³⁴ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 33, 245; Soja, *Thirdspace*, 66–67.

³⁵ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 33; Soja, *Thirdspace*, 31.

II. Geography and History in Ezra-Nehemiah

The use of *Abar Naharah* in Ezra-Nehemiah represents the three categories of space outlined by Lefebvre and Soja. The term is grounded in historical geography (perceived space); it is an administrative district within the Persian empire. The author of Ezra-Nehemiah also employs the term for ideological and utopian purposes. We will see that Ezra-Nehemiah presents a utopian picture of the Persians ruling over *Abar Naharah* as culturally inclusive monarchs who are constrained by law (conceived space)—an image at odds with Herodotus's critical evaluation of Eastern despots as ethnocentric and lawless. The idealization of Persian rule, grounded in law, fuels the more immediate lived space of the author of Ezra-Nehemiah, in which an emerging form of Yahwism within the territory *Abar Naharah* is presented as a religion of law. The interpretation will demonstrate the interweaving of perceived, conceived, and lived space in the presentation of *Abar Naharah* as the environment for a new form of Yahwism, governed by law, not kings.

The territory of *Abar Naharah* is firmly rooted in the geopolitical history of the ancient Near East as early as the Neo-Assyrian empire.³⁶ Esarhaddon describes an invasion into the territory *Ebir nari* ("beyond the river"), the Akkadian equivalent of the Aramaic *Abar Naharah*.³⁷ The geographical reference is infused with the social and political perspective of the Assyrians. The nations "beyond the river" are those on the west side of the Euphrates. Esarhaddon lists twenty-two regions and kings in *Ebir nari* from Tyre in the north to Gaza in the south, as well as Cyprus.³⁸ The administrative structure of the Neo-Assyrian empire continues through the rule of the Neo-Babylonians and into the Persian empire, where the geopolitical district of *Abar Naharah* provides the setting for Ezra-Nehemiah.

The setting of *Abar Naharah* grounds the literature of Ezra-Nehemiah in the political realism of Persian rule. The geopolitical district *Abar Naharah* and its administrators are mentioned no fewer than seventeen times in Ezra-Nehemiah, usually in Aramaic (עבר נהר), but also in Hebrew (עבר הנהר).³⁹

³⁶ I. Eph'al, "Syria-Palestine under Achaemenid Rule," in *Persia, Greece, and the Western Mediterranean* (ed. John Boardman et al.; vol. 4 of *The Cambridge Ancient History*, ed. John Boardman et al.; 2d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 139–40; Gösta W. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 821 n. 3; and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Holy Land: From the Persian to the Arab Conquests (536 B.C. to A.D. 640): A Historical Geography* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 12.

³⁷ CAD E, 8.

³⁸ ANET, 291 (v 54–vi 1).

³⁹ The Aramaic occurrences include five instances in the letter exchange between Rehum and Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:10, 11, 16, 17, 20), seven in the correspondence of Tattenai and Darius

The phrase “across the river” occurs in another group of texts in the Hebrew Bible to indicate the distant lands east of the Euphrates River, where humans worship many gods. The covenant at Shechem provides an example. Joshua encourages the Israelites to “put away the gods that your ancestors served ‘beyond the river’ (בעבר הנהר) . . .” (Josh 24:14).⁴⁰ The phrase indicates foreign and strange lands from the distant past, recalling the edge-of-the-world geography noted earlier in Herodotus.⁴¹ This meaning has nothing to do with the setting of *Abar Naharah* in Ezra-Nehemiah. The contrast further reinforces the realism of the setting in Ezra-Nehemiah as representing only the perceived space of Persian rule west of the Euphrates and the politics in the region.

The one other occurrence in the Hebrew Bible of *Abar Naharah* as a territory west of the Euphrates cautions against limiting the representation of geography in Ezra-Nehemiah to perceived space. 1 Kings 5:4 (Eng. 4:24) equates the kingdom of Solomon with the region of *Abar Naharah*, “for he [Solomon] had dominion over all the region across the river (בכל־עבר הנהר, i.e., “west of the Euphrates”) from Tiphshah to Gaza, over all the kings across the river (בכל־עבר הנהר); and he had peace on all sides.” The boundaries of preexilic Israel at no time correspond to this statement. One suspects an inner-biblical relationship between 1 Kgs 5:4 and Ezra-Nehemiah, especially since it is the only such occurrence outside of this literature.⁴² Indeed, the statement brings the rule of Solomon into conformity with the research of Artaxerxes in Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra 4:20) that Judean kings once ruled the entire region of *Abar Naharah*: “Jerusalem has had mighty kings who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River (בכל־עבר נהרה), to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid” (Ezra 4:20).

The inner-biblical relationship between the idealized rule of Solomon and the research of Artaxerxes illustrates the manner in which Israelite historians interweave the perceived space of historical geography with the more ideologi-

(Ezra 5:3, 6[2x]; 6:6[2x], 8, 13), and two in the decree of Artaxerxes authorizing the return of Ezra (Ezra 7:21, 25). There are four additional occurrences in Hebrew, most associated with Artaxerxes (Ezra 8:36; Neh 2:7, 9; 3:7).

⁴⁰ See Josh 24:2, 3, and 14. In each case the point of view is from Palestine, looking west, and the term indicates a boundary, not a territory. Texts similar to Josh 24 include 2 Sam 10:16 = 1 Chr 19:16; 1 Kgs 14:15; and Isa 7:20. Isaiah 18:1 and Zeph 3:10 employ the phrase “beyond the rivers of Cush” (מעבר לנהר־כוש) to signify a southern boundary.

⁴¹ The phrase “across the river” indicates an eastern boundary and so depicts two territories: the land east of the Euphrates is known as the *Aram Naharaim*, while the western territory is the land of Amorites and Hittites. For further discussion, see J. J. Finkelstein, “Mesopotamia,” *JNES* 21 (1962): 73–92; and J. Van Seters, “The Terms ‘Amorite,’ and ‘Hittite,’ in the Old Testament,” *VT* 22 (1972): 64–81; idem, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 33–34.

⁴² Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1983), 72.

cal forms of conceived and lived space. The ideological interpretation of *Abar Naharah* is not confined to 1 Kgs 5, but is also important to the message of Ezra-Nehemiah. The author of Ezra-Nehemiah employs the geopolitical meaning of *Abar Naharah* to advance three social and religious arguments about the nature of Persian rule and its impact on Yahwism. First, the Persian monarchs in general, and Artaxerxes in particular, are idealized as kings who uphold the law in *Abar Naharah* and are restricted by it.⁴³ Second, not only Persian kings but Persian law itself is represented as an ideal in Ezra-Nehemiah. It is impartial and equally binding for Persians and Judeans. Third, the author of Ezra-Nehemiah advocates a form of environmental determinism in the region of *Abar Naharah*. The Persian rule of law in *Abar Naharah* provides the environment (i.e., the *nomos*) for the transformation of Yahwism from a messianic religion centered in a monarchy to a religion of law, constituted in the Torah of Moses.

Abar Naharah occurs in four stories in Ezra-Nehemiah, dividing between two Persian monarchs, Artaxerxes and Darius. Three stories are about Artaxerxes, and one focuses on Darius. All the stories idealize Persian rule in *Abar Naharah*, but the sequence of stories surrounding Artaxerxes carries the argument about *Abar Naharah* and the role of Yahwism in this territory. The four stories can be summarized as follows:

1. The letter exchange between Rehum and Artaxerxes, in which Artaxerxes halts the restoration of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:7–23). The geopolitical setting of *Abar Naharah* is central in this exchange (Ezra 4:10, 11, 16, 17, 20). All the nations in the province *Abar Naharah* write a letter of complaint to Artaxerxes: “To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the people of the province *Abar Naharah*” (Ezra 4:10, 11). They warn the king that if Jerusalem is restored, he “will then have no possession in the province *Abar Naharah*” (Ezra 4:16).
2. The letter exchange between Tattenai and Darius, concerning the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple (Ezra 5:3–6:15). The inquiry concerns building permits. Darius allows for the rebuilding of the temple upon discovery of the proper permits. *Abar Naharah* is frequently repeated in this section as a title of Tattenai, “the governor of the province *Abar Naharah*” (Ezra 5:3, 6[2x]; 6:6[2x], 8, 13).
3. Artaxerxes commissions Ezra to promulgate the Torah of Moses throughout *Abar Naharah* (Ezra 7:12–26). He commissions “all the

⁴³ The rule of law and its restriction upon Persian kings are stated explicitly by Xerxes to Esther and Mordecai: “no document written in the king’s name and sealed with his ring can be revoked” (Esth 8:8).

treasurers in the province *Abar Naharah*” to support the work (Ezra 7:21), and he gives Ezra judicial power to “judge all the people in the province *Abar Naharah*” (Ezra 7:25).

4. Artaxerxes reverses his policy on Jerusalem by sending Nehemiah (Neh 2), who requests a letter of introduction from the king for “the governors of the province *Abar Naharah*” (Neh 2:7, 9).

The summaries indicate two different uses of the term *Abar Naharah*. It is an administrative title for Tattenai in the story about Darius and a geopolitical territory in the sequence of stories about Artaxerxes. The central theme in the correspondence between Tattenai and Darius is the building permit for the temple. The term *Abar Naharah* is used throughout the exchange of letters. Tattenai is repeatedly identified as the governor of *Abar Naharah* (Ezra 5:3, 6[2x]; 6:6[2x], 8, 13).⁴⁴ But the focus is on his administrative position and not on the geographical territory. Tattenai encounters Zerubbabel and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah completing the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 5:3–5), and, unaware of the decree of Cyrus a century earlier (Ezra 1:2–4), he writes to Darius (Ezra 5:6–17). It is in his capacity as governor of *Abar Naharah* that Tattenai inquires whether there is in fact a decree of Cyrus on file, authorizing the building of the temple. The correspondence between Tattenai and Darius does not mention conflict surrounding the building of the temple, and no reference is made to geopolitical threats posed by the construction of the temple. The concern is simply whether the law is being followed. Darius searches the archives, locates the decree of Cyrus in Ecbatana, and honors it. There is an idealization of Persian rule in this sequence of events. Cyrus is a religiously inclusive ruler, authorizing the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, and Darius upholds the rule of law with his decree to Tattenai, the governor of *Abar Naharah*.

The geopolitical meaning of *Abar Naharah* comes into sharper focus in the stories associated with Artaxerxes. The shift in meaning is accompanied by political conflict as well as a change in topic from the building of the temple to the political threat posed by the city of Jerusalem. The correspondence between Rehum and Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7–23) signals the changes. As all commentators note, both the chronology and the content of the letters are out of context in Ezra 1–6.⁴⁵ Artaxerxes should follow Darius. As we noted above, the

⁴⁴ See A. T. Olmstead, “Tattenai, Governor of ‘Across the River,’” *JNES* 3 (1944): 46.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., L. L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (London: Routledge, 1998), 17–21. A common argument is that the digression results from the author’s wishing to chronicle all the conflicts, even those that progress beyond the temple. See J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 110–12.

disruption in the chronology of the Persian kings is a spatial form device, emphasizing the setting of the decree of Artaxerxes within the province of *Abar Naharah*. The correspondence between Rehum and Artaxerxes introduces distinct themes from the exchange between Tattenai and Darius. The letter of Rehum underscores conflict, and it is more threatening in tone. The concern is the walls of Jerusalem and the geopolitical threat posed by the restored city, not the temple. Most noteworthy for the present study is that the meaning of *Abar Naharah* changes with the new geopolitical theme, focusing more on the territory than on administrative offices. Ezra 4:9–11a signals the change. The supporters of the letter include the different ethnic groups that populate the geopolitical region *Abar Naharah*, including Persians, people of Erech, Babylonians, people of Susa, and all the nations whom Osnappar (i.e., Esarhaddon) settled in Samaria and in the entire province of *Abar Naharah*.⁴⁶

The letter of Rehum is not simply a bureaucratic inquiry about building permits; it is written against the city of Jerusalem, and it represents a broad base of support from the entire population of the territory of *Abar Naharah* (Ezra 4:10).⁴⁷ The theme of the letter is political, not religious. Rehum encourages Artaxerxes to research the history of Jerusalem. He will discover that its past is filled with revolts and political rebellion against kings.⁴⁸ Rehum does not mention the threat of a new Judean king should the city be restored, but it is implied.⁴⁹ He warns Artaxerxes that if Jerusalem is completed, Persia will lose control of the territory of *Abar Naharah* (Ezra 4:16). The reply of Artaxerxes makes the threat of a Judean monarch explicit. He notes a long history of past kings of Jerusalem who did indeed rule the entire region of *Abar Naharah* and collected all of its taxes for themselves (Ezra 4:20).⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ezra 4:9–11a is likely an insertion that underscores the geopolitical function of *Abar Naharah*. See Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 78–79; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 62–63.

⁴⁷ Ezra 4:7, 8, and 9–11a have an uneasy connection. Verse 7 mentions characters (Bishlam?, Mithredath, and Tabeel) who do not continue into vv. 8 or 9–11a. Verse 8 introduces the new characters Rehum and Shimshai. Verses 9–11a provide additional commentary on these characters, adding detailed information about the population of the region of *Abar Naharah*. See, e.g., Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 61–63. Whatever the exact compositional history may be in the formation of Ezra 4:7–11a, the result is an emphasis on geography. The addition of vv. 9–11a, moreover, is absent from 1 Esdras, which also identifies the territory with a different term, *Coele-syria*.

⁴⁸ Jerusalem is characterized by rebellions (מַרְדָּתָא, Ezra 4:12, 15). See the repetition of this term in the Behistun Inscription to describe rebels (מַרְדָּא, col. 1, lines 4, 7, 8, 10; col. 2, lines 17, 20, 24, 25). Rehum's letter also states that Jerusalem is bad (בֹּאֲשָׁמָה, Ezra 4:12): it revolts (אֲשֶׁרֵרִיר, Ezra 4:15) regularly and brings grief (נֹזֵק, Ezra 4:13, 15) by taking taxes (וּמִדָּךְ בְּלוֹ וְהִלֵּךְ, Ezra 4:13).

⁴⁹ "Rebel" in the Behistun Inscription means that a nation or city "made a king" (col. 2, line 17).

⁵⁰ The reply of Artaxerxes employs the language from the letter of Rehum. He, too, describes the threat of rebellion (מַרְדָּתָא, Ezra 4:19) and revolts (אֲשֶׁרֵרִיר, Ezra 4:19). He halts the restoration

The correspondence between Rehum and Artaxerxes plays a central thematic role in the literature, underscoring the political danger of messianic movements surrounding Jerusalem and its temple. The exchange focuses in particular on the past history of monarchical rule in the territory of *Abar Naharah*, suggesting the theme of messianism—a topic associated with the prophets Haggai and Zechariah in other literature but absent from their portrayal in Ezra-Nehemiah. The author of Ezra-Nehemiah voices a negative evaluation of Judean monarchs indirectly through the official correspondence of Rehum and Artaxerxes. The criticism is based in part on an ideological interpretation of geography as conceived space. Judean monarchs are part of the history of *Abar Naharah*, but they are not part of its present social and political environment. The Aramaic language serves a literary purpose, giving the author's negative evaluation of Judean monarchs a sense of historical objectivity and authenticity. The criticism is not the opinion of the author; it is a judgment arising from official Aramaic correspondence. Not only Rehum and Artaxerxes, but representatives of the entire population, make it clear that Judean kings are a dangerous anachronism in the new world order of *Abar Naharah*.⁵¹

The full implication of the geopolitical argument about monarchy and law in *Abar Naharah* is not resolved in Ezra 1–6. The decree of Artaxerxes in Ezra 4:7–23 is meant to be read in conjunction with his subsequent appearances in Ezra-Nehemiah, the commissionings of Ezra (Ezra 7:12–26) and Nehemiah (Neh 2). His statement at the close of the letter exchange with Rehum (Ezra 4:21), that the walls of Jerusalem not be rebuilt “until I make a decree,” anticipates his commission of Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 2:1–10). The two stories share similar themes. The commission of Nehemiah is also political, not religious. He wishes to restore his ancestral city (Neh 2:5).⁵² The political focus indicates that the mission of Nehemiah is intended to be a reversal of the previous decree of Artaxerxes. The reversal is codified in writing, with letters addressed specifically to the governors of *Abar Naharah* (Neh 2:7, 9). The literary framework indicates that the present form of Ezra-Nehemiah is structured in part around the Persian king Artaxerxes and the political role of Jerusalem in the territory of *Abar Naharah*.

The commission of Ezra (Ezra 7:12–26) provides the key for Artaxerxes' reversal of policy about Jerusalem.⁵³ The commission is not about politics; it is

of Jerusalem by taking away taxes (מִדָּךְ בְּלוּ וְהָלַךְ, Ezra 4:20) because the restoration may bring grief (נֹכַח, Ezra 4:22).

⁵¹ See Daniel Snell, “Why Is There Aramaic in the Bible?” *JSOT* 18 (1980): 32–51, esp. 32–35.

⁵² Certainly there is literary design in the construction of the story. Nehemiah never mentions the city of Jerusalem by name to Artaxerxes.

⁵³ For a detailed comparison of the Aramaic decree of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:12–26 with other Aramaic letters, see David Janzen, “The ‘Mission’ of Ezra and the Persian-Period Temple Commu-

about religion. Ezra is commissioned to promulgate religious law, but the commission has political implications, especially when it is read against the backdrop of Artaxerxes' condemnation of Judean monarchs in Ezra 4:7–23. If monarchs represent the history of *Abar Naharah*, then Ezra embodies its present. He is a scribe, skilled in the interpretation of law. He embodies the world of writing, law, and documentation represented by the Persian rule in *Abar Naharah*.⁵⁴ The form of Yahwism that Ezra advocates reflects the new world order of *Abar Naharah*, not the past messianism of monarchs.⁵⁵ Ezra represents a religion of law, documented in the Torah of Moses.⁵⁶ It requires magistrates and judges for implementation, not kings.⁵⁷

The territory of *Abar Naharah* is central to the commission of Ezra. It defines the scope of his commission (Ezra 7:25). Thus, the region once ruled by rebellious Judean kings will now be governed by Judean religious law. Artaxerxes commissions Ezra to implement this form of Yahwism throughout the entire territory of *Abar Naharah*. And he even reinforces the authority of the religious law with the power of state law (Ezra 7:26). Once again the Aramaic language takes on a literary role, underscoring the authenticity and authority of the commission (Ezra 7:12–26). The crucial role of Ezra's mission is confirmed by the literary design of Ezra-Nehemiah. The mission of Ezra to implement a religion of law in *Abar Naharah* paves the way for Artaxerxes to reverse his earlier decree that Jerusalem not be rebuilt, when he commissions Nehemiah.

The overview of *Abar Naharah* indicates its significant role in the literary design of Ezra-Nehemiah. And, like the geography in Herodotus, the territory takes on a range of meaning that corresponds to the three categories of space

nity," *JBL* 119 (2000): 619–43. Janzen argues on the basis of language and form that the decree is not a source document but a literary creation by the author.

⁵⁴ Communication in *Abar Naharah* takes place through writing (Ezra 5:7, 10), reading (Ezra 4:18, 23), and translating (Ezra 4:18). Documents have authority and authenticity in this world. They consist of decrees (מִכְרָב, שִׁים טַעַם, Ezra 1:1; 4:8, 17, 21; 5:3, 5, 9, 13; 6:1, 3, 4, 12; 7:23), letters (נִשְׁוִין, אִנְרָא, Ezra 4:18, 23; 5:5), copies of letters (פִּרְשָׁן, Ezra 4:11, 23; 5:6), and reports (פִּתּוֹם, Ezra 4:17; 5:7, 11; 6:11). Government offices consist of the Book of Records (בִּסְפֵּר דְּכִרְיָא, Ezra 4:15; 6:2), the treasure house (בֵּית נִוְיָא, Ezra 5:17; 6:1; 7:20), and archives (בֵּית סִפְרָיָא, Ezra 6:1).

⁵⁵ There is no idealizing of Judean kings in Ezra-Nehemiah. David is remembered for liturgy (Ezra 3:10; Neh 12:46). Solomon is remembered for breaking the law against intermarriage (Neh 13:26–27). Kings are remembered in prayers for their iniquity (Ezra 9:7; Neh 9:22, 34). The only political association with kings is the identification of Jerusalem as the "city of David" (Neh 3:15; 12:37).

⁵⁶ Ezra is a scribe (סֹפֵר, Ezra 7:6); he promulgates a written law, the Torah of Moses (תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה, Ezra 7:6) or of YHWH (תּוֹרַת יְהוָה, Ezra 7:6). He advocates laws (חֻק וּמִשְׁפָּט, Ezra 7:10). For discussion on the idealization of writing and documents in Ezra-Nehemiah, see Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (SBLMS 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 58–60.

⁵⁷ Artaxerxes commissions Ezra to establish judges in Ezra 7:25–26.

outlined by Lefebvre and Soja. *Abar Naharah* is grounded in the perceived space of historical geography. It represents a defined province of the Persian empire, reaching back to the administrative structure of the Neo-Assyrians. The physical terrain and boundaries of the province are open to historical geography, as Anson Rainey has demonstrated.⁵⁸

Abar Naharah also represents the categories of conceived and lived space for the author of Ezra-Nehemiah. And, like Herodotus, the two categories tend to merge in the writing of ancient historiography, making a clear separation between the two difficult. Conceived space in *Abar Naharah* may be the portrayal of the land as vacant, until the returnees reoccupy the empty cities and the fallow land. This is certainly an ideological presentation, serving the purposes of the author.⁵⁹ The idealization of Persian rule in *Abar Naharah* also advances an ideology of conceived space. The author of Ezra-Nehemiah builds on the geopolitical reality of *Abar Naharah* to make ideological arguments about the role of law in society under Persian rule. For the author of Ezra-Nehemiah, *Abar Naharah*, represents a new world order and environment (*nomos*), in which law replaces monarchs. Finally, the more immediate category of lived space may be the author's portrayal of Yahwism in the environment of *Abar Naharah*. The author makes clear that the messianism that characterized past forms of Yahwism when Israelite monarchs ruled over *Abar Naharah* has evolved into a religion of law, represented by Ezra, the scribe of God. Thus the history is an argument for a new form of Yahwism, arising from the lived experience of the author's postexilic community. The new form of Yahwism, according to the author of Ezra-Nehemiah, is represented by the Torah of Moses, a religious lawbook, itself a product of the new world order made possible by Persian law.

The persuasive power of Ezra-Nehemiah arises in part from the constant overlapping of perceived, conceived, and lived space in the presentation of *Abar Naharah*. The history is an interweaving of historical geography, the realism of geopolitics, and religion, held together in part by a view of environmental determinism. As a result, the work resists a simple dichotomy between fact and fiction or history and myth. The successful blending of spatial categories by the author is evident in the continuing debate over the historical accuracy of the presentation in Ezra-Nehemiah.

⁵⁸ Rainey, "Satrapy 'Beyond the River,'" 51–78.

⁵⁹ See S. Japhet, "People and Land in the Restoration Period," in *Das Land Israel in biblischer Zeit: Jerusalem-Symposium 1981 der Hebräischen Universität und der Georg-August-Universität* (GTA 25; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 113–14; and, more broadly, *Leading Captivity Captive: "The Exile" as History and Ideology* (ed. L. L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 278; European Seminar in Historical Methodology 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

III. The Geopolitics of Persia in Ancient Historiography

I wish to conclude the article by returning to the topic of Persian rule and its influence on historiography in the ancient world. Arnaldo Momigliano encourages such a study, noting that both Greek and Jewish historians share a reaction to Persian rule that influences the development of historiography in each culture.⁶⁰ The present study of geography and history supports the general conclusion of Momigliano. Herodotus and Ezra-Nehemiah share a similarity of method in their use of geography. Ezra-Nehemiah demonstrates the same interweaving of geographical realism and ideology evident in Herodotus. Each employs realistic geography to advance geopolitical themes that are forged in part as a reaction to Persian rule, and in each case an ideological interpretation of geography provides the springboard for evaluating the character of Persian monarchs.

Yet each portrays a very different attitude toward the Persians. For Herodotus, Asia provides the environment that nurtures unity, and with it monarchy. But the desire of Persian monarchs to unify the world through conquest, and thus cross their natural geopolitical boundaries, is the epitome of lawlessness. By contrast, there are no conquest themes in Ezra-Nehemiah with regard to the Persian emperors. They are presented simply as the rulers of the world (Ezra 1:2–4), and, rather than take land, they return conquered land to indigenous populations. *Abar Naharah* is the geographical horizon in which the author of Ezra-Nehemiah evaluates Persian monarchs. Their rule in *Abar Naharah* is characterized by law, writing, and official records. Persian law, moreover, is highlighted rhetorically by the shifting of language in the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah. Aramaic, not Hebrew, represents the impartial rule of Persian law in *Abar Naharah* and the legal worldview of the Persian empire.⁶¹

Herodotus and the author of Ezra-Nehemiah also employ geopolitical themes to evaluate critically their own culture. Herodotus criticizes the lack of unity in Greece, while also advocating its freedom through the political structures of oligarchy and democracy.⁶² The author of Ezra-Nehemiah criticizes Judean messianism, while advocating the observance of the Torah of Moses in the territory of *Abar Naharah*. The result is a new world order in which Aramaic civil law and Hebrew religious law reinforce each other.

The interpretations of Persian rule by Herodotus and the author of Ezra-Nehemiah could not be further apart. Yet they share a similar approach to

⁶⁰ Arnaldo Momigliano, "Persian Historiography, Greek Historiography, and Jewish Historiography," in *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Sather Classical Lectures 54; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 5–28, esp. 16–17.

⁶¹ See n. 2 for a list of the Aramaic letters and decrees in Ezra-Nehemiah.

⁶² See Lateiner, *Historical Method of Herodotus*, 157–62; Romm, *Herodotus*, 173–90.

geography in writing history, one that is simultaneously ideological and historically realistic. My purpose is not to demonstrate a historical or literary connection between Herodotus and the author of Ezra-Nehemiah. Rather I have sought through comparison to illustrate the ideological use of realistic geography in ancient historiography as conceived and lived space. The study of Herodotus and Ezra-Nehemiah suggests that the persuasive power of ancient historiography rests to a strong degree on the interweaving of perceived, conceived, and lived space, requiring contemporary readers also to interrelate, not separate, the different uses of geography. A hermeneutical stance of opposition between fact and fiction does not capture the dynamic use of realistic geography in the literature.

The interpretation of *Abar Naharah* demonstrates that the spatial organization of literature hides consequences that are not revealed through the study of time and chronology. In a recent critical reevaluation of space and spatial interpretation, Edward Soja goes so far as to conclude that "the 'making of geography' more than the 'making of history' . . . provides the most revealing tactical and theoretical world."⁶³ It is doubtful that the presentation of geography is more important than chronology in Ezra-Nehemiah.⁶⁴ Yet geography is crucial in the organization of the literature, in its thematic development, and in its influence on the reader. The present interpretation of *Abar Naharah* is but one dimension of the spatial organization of Ezra-Nehemiah. Further interpretation of the *Golah* experience in Babylon and the utopian imagery surrounding Jerusalem and the province of Judah would add even more to the ideological landscape of Ezra-Nehemiah.

⁶³ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 6.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., D. Kraemer, "On the Relationship of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah," *JSOT* 59 (1993): 73–92.